# Book review

**Chen, Li-Chi Lee (2017).** *Taiwanese and Polish Humour: A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis*. **Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.**

Li-Chi Lee Chen is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland. His main research interests comprise discourse analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. His previous publications include (among other things) articles in international linguistics journals, such as *The Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, *Concentric: Studies in Linguistics*, *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, *Journal of National Taiwan Normal University: Linguistics and Literature*. He is also interested in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

The structure of the reviewed book consists of eight chapters, each divided into smaller sections. The first chapter introduces the aim of the study presented in this book, namely the attempt to understand the mechanisms of humour occurring in social interactions both in Taiwan and Poland, as well as to find the ways the differences between Taiwanese and Polish cultures affect the uses of humour. In this part, the author briefly touches upon various theories of humour, categorising these, after Attardo (1994), into three frameworks: social, psychological, and cognitive. Finally, Chen describes the data analysed, namely casual conversations among Taiwanese and Polish friends and conversations on *Kāng Xī Láile,* a late-night variety show in Taiwan, and on *Kuba Wojewódzki*, an entertainment talk show in Poland.

The second chapter presents the history of humour both in Taiwan and in Poland, as well as the methodology used in the study. The next four chapters are devoted to the analysis itself. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss various discourse strategies used in Taiwanese and Polish verbal interactions, respectively, whereas Chapters 5 and 6 explore different types of humour found in the two analysed shows. In the following part of the book, the author discusses the results of the study in the light of social issues and makes an attempt to provide the characteristics of Taiwanese and Polish humour. Finally, in the last Chapter, Li-Chi Lee Chen concludes the analysis by summarising the results of the study and provides the limitations of the study by giving directions for possible future research.

*Taiwanese and Polish Humour: A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis* is a unique publication that brings together two so subjectively distant cultures in an attempt to compare and contrast the uses of humour in both conventional and institutionalised conversations, that is, among individuals and in the media. It is also crucial to point out that, despite the fact that humour has been a subject of interest for centuries now, it is uncommon to come across works that are so explicitly comparative. Being one of a kind, this book provides a complete research tool for analysing humour in social interactions, as the author adopts three methodological approaches (conversation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, and interactional linguistics) in the study. Therefore, rather than focusing only on the linguistic aspects, the analysis also incorporates, for example, paralinguistic aspects (such as gestures or facial expressions). As Li-Chi Lee Chen claims, "humour is culture specific, context-sensitive and gender-bound" (p. 211); the production and perception of

humour is dependent on socio-cultural and contextual factors. Both verbal and non-verbal cues are equally important in the analysis, especially when studying humour in interaction. Thus, this multidimensional approach makes the analysis comprehensive and the results reliable and valid.

The subject of the analysis is spoken interaction both in the Taiwanese and the Polish languages. The casual conversations (among close friends) have been recorded either at home or in a coffee shop. The conversations on the above-mentioned TV shows have been randomly selected from six episodes of the Taiwanese show that aired between 2010 and 2012 and from five episodes of the Polish show that aired in 2006. The author presents in his study the original transcriptions as well as the English translations. Also, the non-verbal expressions are noted in the transcriptions, such as smiling, sighing, silence, etc. Each discourse strategy and humour type enumerated by Chen is illustrated by at least one excerpt from the data collected. Then, the situation of the excerpt is explained, which is vital for the readers, as reading a piece of conversation taken out of context might be confusing and lead to misunderstandings, especially when the readers are not acquainted with the speaking styles of the participants of the conversation or even the language that the conversation is being held in. While explaining the situation of the interaction, Chen also directs the reader's attention at the key words of the conversation that either are indicators of humour or are important in the analysis. Here, the author not only focuses on the meaning of the words (semantics) and the context that contributes to the meaning (pragmatics), but also takes into consideration the non-verbal cues, i.e. what these cues indicate and how they can influence the interaction.

Apart from the author's analysis, comments and view on humour, Chen presents other researchers' work on various topics related to humour. The broad literature includes, among other things, studies conducted by Polish, Taiwanese, and Chinese authors. This review of already existing literature not only demonstrates the author's knowledge of the research area, but also introduces the works to those readers who are not familiar with such topics. Moreover, what should be appreciated is the author's effort in using inclusive language, that is the use of symmetrical paired pronoun constructions (such as *s/he*) in generic reference instead of using masculine forms (such as *he*, *him*, *his*). Indeed, as studies show, the use of masculine generics associates mainly with men and makes women invisible, creating an impression that male is a norm (e.g. Gastil 1990, Chew & Kelley-Chew 2007). However, this strategy might not be the perfect solution to the problem of generics, since symmetrical paired pronoun constructions might be tiring or distracting in reception when used repetitively (Wilcoxon 1989). Therefore, it is worth considering using the so-called singular *they*. Although this may seem controversial to some (as it is claimed to breach the rule of number agreement), it has been proven that singular *they* does function as a generic pronoun in English language (e.g. Gastil 1990, Romaine 2001).

Despite the broad literature overview, there seem to be some omissions. Firstly, in the section on methodological approaches titled "Multimodal discourse analysis," Li-Chi Lee Chen introduces the idea of language use being multimodal, that is not only being spoken words but also visible bodily actions, for example, gestures, facial expressions or body movements. However, this part lacks any attempt at defining multimodal discourse analysis. This may cause confusion among readers who are not acquainted with this paradigm. Moreover, it should be noted that multimodal discourse analysis studies

language not only in combination with gestures and actions but also other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, music and sounds (O'Halloran 2011: 120). Of course, these were not important for the sake of the analysis but the explanation could have been made. Secondly, in Chapter 7, the author refers to gender as a constraint on humour, but at the same time does not discuss the phenomenon of gender itself. Gender is no longer viewed as a binary concept but rather a spectrum (Richards et al. 2016). Moreover, gender is not seen as a constant variable that is assigned once in a lifetime. Instead, gender is performed in various contexts (Cameron 1997). Finally, the author seems to neglect the problem of defining humour by simply stating that "there is no fixed definition of what humor is" (p. 31). More attention to this problem could have been given and some attempts in specifying what constitutes humour could have been reported.

*Taiwanese and Polish Humour: A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis* fulfils the main assumptions about comparing and contrasting two distinct cultures in order to distinguish discourse strategies for constructing humour and to list types of humour in Taiwan and Poland. It is an original study, which, at the same time, draws upon other researchers' work, making it complete and reliable. It certainly is worth recommending, not only to those who are interested in Taiwanese and/or Polish humour occurring in spoken interactions. Although it omits certain issues (which may be explained by the length constraints), the book is worth reading. The uniqueness of the topic and the comprehensive approach in analysing interactional humour are the main advantages of this book.

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